

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
THURSDAY, JANUARY 6, 2022

Present:

Committee Members: Sophia Berard, Jeff Bickford, Raven Pfaff, Offie Wortham, Adelle MacDowell, Shayne Spence

Others: Jackie Stanton, Mark Nielsen

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Sophia called the meeting to order at 6:33.

2. Review Agenda and Any Adjustments, Changes, Additions

No changes to the agenda were needed.

3. Approve Meeting Minutes from 12/2/21

Jeff moved to approve the minutes of December 2, 2021 and the motion was passed with Shayne abstaining.

Sophia said the committee ought to have a conversation with the selectboard at some point to re-establish what the protocol is for committee appointments. Will we be granted the privilege to review applicants and make recommendations? That was taken from the committee and she thinks it is important to re-establish it.

4. Appoint Co-Chair

Sophia said she thinks appointing a co-chair would be helpful. Co-chairs could take turns running meetings. Shayne said he thinks both Raven and Jeff would be great as co-chair if they were willing. (*Offie and Jackie arrived at 6:37.*)

Jeff said he would be happy to help out but he would give preference to Raven due to her seniority if she wants to be co-chair. Raven said she is not sure she would be the best fit for the position right now. She would love to do it eventually but she thinks she needs more experience with committee protocol, etc. first.

Sophia moved to appoint Jeff as co-chair of the Racial Justice Committee and the motion was passed.

It was agreed to schedule future meetings for 6:30 as that time works better for several people.

Sophia said we could have a Zoom option at the next meeting if we want to. As long as we are not under a state of emergency we also have to have a physical location where people can attend the meeting. That requirement was lifted during the state of emergency. Jeff said if the preference of the committee is to meet remotely he could be at the municipal building with a laptop.

5. HRC Workshops

Sophia said the Human Rights Commission workshops will both be on Zoom. She is waiting for the Zoom registration links from Amanda Garces. The workshops will be February 10 from 5:30 to 7:30 and February 12 from 10:00 to 12:00. Adelle and Shayne both volunteered to help Raven publicize the workshops.

6. Committee Name Change

Sophia asked if the committee should change its name to encompass a larger scope of social justice and equity. Does anyone have ideas about a new name? Shayne said he has seen groups named JEDI – Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. That is an eye catching name that could help get people interested. He would support that. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is another good option. Jackie said the Town of Essex has an umbrella Committee on Equity for Essex that has a great charge. (*The Committee on Equity for Essex is dedicated to redistributing decision-making, resources, and power into our community to ensure the voices of those who have been historically marginalized are centered.*) Underneath that umbrella they have another committee that changed its name from the Safety, Policing and Racial Justice Task Force to BEST – Building Equity, Solidarity and Trust. She likes both of those.

Kyle said adding the social justice piece was something she pushed for when she was on the selectboard because of the intersectionality between racial equity and social equity. She thought this should have been a racial and social justice committee from the beginning. Jackie said that was echoed by the community but the selectboard was not in favor at the time.

Sophia said she likes JEDI but has seen a number of groups using it. She wouldn't want to confuse people. She feels we couldn't use BEST as it is already being used.

Offie asked, what have been some of the real problems we have had in Johnson over the past year? Which issues are we dealing with? Is there a problem right now? Jackie said she feels confident there is. Sophia said part of the reason the committee was formed was that there were issues people of color were dealing with. Social inequality exists here, as it does everywhere.

Jackie said Offie has stated several times in public meetings and in the newspaper that he doesn't see a need for this committee. She doesn't know why he is on the committee. What is he bringing? Offie said he is here because he wants to see if there is a need for the committee. If there is a need, then let's do something about it, but he hasn't personally seen a need in the 12 years he has been here. He is here to see what the problem is. Sophia said other people have written about it, showing that they have a problem. Jackie said Sophia and Eric wrote a piece in the paper and cited a few things. Offie said he read it.

Jeff said he is glad that Offie hasn't experienced problems but there is plenty of evidence that other people do. He has never personally experienced housing shortage but he knows that is a major issue in our county. The root of a lot of the racial tension and racism in majority white communities like Johnson is that if people haven't seen it played out or experienced it, it is easy to believe it is not an issue in that community. But we know it is. When he thinks about

what we are able to do as a committee and what we have been charged with, we don't have as clear a mission as the group in Essex. We have the ability to educate and advocate. Jackie added celebrate.

Offie said his big thing is education. His experience is that if he can meet with someone who is racist face to face and talk to them, that solves the problem. He is here to meet racists and talk to them. Jeff said he thinks what Offie is talking about is really at the soul of a lot of the events we have planned for the coming fiscal year. Events will create opportunities for people to have conversations. Kyle said her intention for this committee was to keep the conversation going, not stop it or sweep it under the rug or normalize the racism some are seeing in this community

Mark Nielsen said he is on the school board. They have a one-year contract with someone who will be educating teachers on dealing with conflicts at school between people of different races or classes. Many students leave Vermont after they graduate and the district wants to make them aware of what goes on in other areas where racism is rampant. Though they may not see it here, it is prevalent in many places students may go to. Jackie said she wants to push back a little on the idea that the problem exists in other places and not here. It is here. She has seen it here. Mark agreed.

Shayne said another example of something we have seen here that demonstrates the need for a wider scope for the committee was the Lamoille girls' soccer game where people on the sidelines were yelling things at the girls playing soccer. Conversations about things like that are worth our time. Jackie agreed.

Shayne suggested one simple way to change the committee name would be to just call it the Racial and Social Justice Committee. Sophia said one idea she thought of was CEED – Celebrating Equity, Education and Diversity.

Kyle asked if the name has to be approved by the selectboard. Sophia said no; Brian Story said the committee can just change its name and let them know.

Jackie said she loves the word "alliance." The name Johnson Inclusivity, Diversity and Equity Alliance (IDEA) was suggested, as was Racial Justice and Social Equity Committee.

Jackie said the truth about acronyms is that people never remember what they stand for so you lose the words.

Adelle moved to rename the committee the Racial Justice and Social Equity Committee and the motion was passed.

7. *Budget/Financials Update*

Sophia said Brian Story let us know money to pay for minute taking has to be included in the RJC budget. Up until now the selectboard has been paying for it. We had proposed expenditures of \$2350, with \$825 of that coming from the town and funded by taxes. Adding in the cost of the minute taker brings the total budget to \$3340 with \$1815 to come from taxes.

Sophia said right now we have \$1700 in our account – our \$1000 grant and \$750 raised from t-shirt sales and donations. The \$1000 is allocated for the workshops and potentially a story time. Laura Smith also has a school program she offers that we could look into.

Shayne said he thinks it would be worthwhile for committee members to show up to town meeting to make the case for why this money is going to be worth it, because it will be a new budget item for people to consider. Kyle said if there are going to be tables at the back of the room for groups that is another great way to have people connect with committee members. The RJC will also have a report in the town report. That will be due in February.

Raven and Sophia will connect about working on the RJC banner.

8. Discussion: VTDigger Article – Vermont Legislature to Consider Ending Qualified Immunity for Police Officers

Shayne said there is a bill proposed in the Vermont Senate that would end qualified immunity for police officers. This is something he has long felt was a needed reform. He thinks the bill has the potential to get passed this year. His thought was that it would be good for committees like ours to take a stance on reforms like this. He thinks that fits into the education and advocacy piece.

Offie said research backs up the idea that the immunity police have is racist and classist. He doesn't think we should have any problem supporting the bill. Sophia said she thought it was interesting that the Vermont League of Cities and Towns opposed it. Shayne said their reason for opposing it was a slippery slope argument. If we do away with immunity for police officers we may eventually do away with it for municipal and government workers. But right now the proposal is only around police. He would feel differently if it affected municipal and government workers, but they don't have guns. VTDigger talked to a long-time law enforcement person who is in favor of the bill and says it will encourage good policing. He tends to agree with Offie that there is a lot of evidence and public sentiment in favor of the bill but he knows there will be organized opposition to it. Offie said it's good for good police and bad for bad police.

Jeff said qualified immunity is meant to protect a civil servant who does something they were told to do that is not obviously illegal or improper but that turns out to have been improper. It is supposed to protect employees from being individually sued for doing their jobs as they were told to. But he doesn't think it works that way with police. Law enforcement officers can take away people's civil rights in a way that other government employees can't.

It was agreed that Shayne will come to the next meeting with some proposed language in support of the bill.

9. Public Comment

Kyle brought up Jackie's question to Offie about his reasoning for being here because of things he had said previously. She has similar curiosity about Shayne related to social justice, knowing about his past history with campaign funds he accepted that came from anti-LGBTQ people. That is a painful part of his history for her to reconcile with.

Shayne asked, does it feel like he is not in support of those issues? Does it feel like he is less interested in contributing to moving forward on those issues? Those are former employers of his. He didn't agree with every opinion of theirs and he frequently told them his opinions. They were well aware that he did not agree with their opinions on that and decided to support his campaign anyway. He doesn't think there was ever an assumption on their part that they would sway him into feeling differently by giving him that money and he never felt that money affected the positions he took. He was very in favor of those issues and got in trouble with other Republicans because of it. He doesn't feel he has demonstrated he is any less committed to moving forward on these issues. If Kyle would like to hold something like that against him she is free to do so but he will continue moving forward and hopes this committee can be a place to do that.

Jackie said the people Kyle is referring to who contributed to Shayne's campaign are notorious for giving hundreds of thousands of dollars to candidates and causes to prevent citizens from getting married, using public accommodations, etc. They donate to groups that have been identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as hate groups. What made Shayne take that money, knowing what they stand for and the influence they have?

Shayne said he sent out a lot of solicitations to just about everyone he had worked for in the past when he started running for office. He wasn't selective about whether they disagreed with him on some issues.

Jackie asked where he would draw the line. If the KKK offered him money, would he take it? Shayne said that is a ridiculous question. He would not take money from the KKK. He thinks Jackie diminished the work the committee did at this meeting by asking that question.

Jeff said he thinks it is fair to say that campaign contributions and what contributions are accepted or not are a means of communication. But this is not the forum to interrogate someone about past decisions related to that. It is not consistent with what we are trying to accomplish at this meeting. Shayne's work on this committee will be part of the public record and he will be evaluated on the work he does. That is true of everyone, regardless of past decisions. He does not think this is an appropriate argument for this meeting. Offie agreed.

10. Adjourn

Jeff moved to adjourn at 8:13 and the motion was passed.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths